Mystical Prayer According to Saint Jane de Chantal

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General Teaching

Preliminary Observations

Saint Jane de Chantal has very great authority in spirituality. Her formation by an incomparable master, Saint Francis de Sales, her personal experience of the highest workings of grace, her knowledge of a considerable number of holy souls whom she directed so wisely and successfully, all encourage us to listen with complete confidence to the advice she gives to souls aiming at perfection.

In order to understand her instructions we must know that the Sisters to whom they were addressed had, for the most part, already been led by God into the mystical ways. The fervour of those nuns formed by Saint Francis de Sales and his worthy disciple is well known. Those great saints were not content, as people so often are, with requiring them to lead a pious life and practise virtue with concessions to nature; they led them to seek God alone in all things and to die utterly to themselves. What Saint Teresa required of her daughters - and as much must be said of all the great founders - Saint Francis de Sales and Saint Jane de Chantal also required: the absolute practice of the great law given by Jesus, "If any one would come after Me, let him renounce himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow Me". Their whole formation of the first Visitandines tended to make them die to themselves wholly. We know the holy Founder's maxims: "Ask nothing, refuse nothing. . . . As soon as a soul that is fully abandoned to the divine good pleasure perceives any will in itself, it at once puts it to death in the holy will of God" (*Conference II*). "We could never come to perfection so long as we had affection for any imperfection, however small, even if it were only for an idle thought; you would not believe how much harm that does the soul" (*Conference VIII*). The holy founders were very watchful to detect anything that might be human impulse or natural feeling in the nuns they were forming, and very skilful in repressing it. And they made them practise that total detachment lovingly, giving their disciples to understand that God alone can give courage for it, and accustoming them to seek and find strength to practise it in Him.

Such formation was rare at that time, when the reform of the

religious orders, though well on the way, was not yet complete; there were still convents of both sexes in which mental prayer was not even practised. In our days we no longer find such omissions, but there are places where formation is not so perfect as it was in the early Visitation, where we do not aim so high, and so lofty an ideal is not raised. Prayer is taught, mental prayer is recommended, fidelity to duties of state and generous acceptance of all the sacrifices they demand are especially stressed, and rightly. So we succeed in forming men of duty, soundly virtuous souls; but to these souls perfection is not preached, and the practices that are its indispensable conditions are not insisted on: vigorous and constant war on nature, energetic repression of the flights of the imagination, holy indifference and suppression of human feelings, generous privation of everything designed to procure gratification. Those who have not tried to reach that perfect abnegation may certainly become very meritorious if they apply themselves steadfastly to the duties of their state, but the concessions they deliberately make to nature prevent grace from having its full effect. That is the teaching of the saints, and daily experience confirms it.

These servants of God remain in the illuminative way and do not experience the fruits enjoyed by those who are in the unitive way. To enter into relations with God, to make their prayer, they have to set before their eyes motives to awaken their love. They have, it is true, received fights on the great truths, holy impulses, ardent desires, supernatural attractions for certain virtues; their intelligence, more enlightened than that of souls still in the purgative way, and their will, much more firmly resolved to remain faithful to their duties, make the practice of virtue easier for them; but these fights and impulses, which are special helps and yet should be classed among common graces, do not keep the soul constantly united to God, and do not make it capable of following the rules of contemplative life.

To those who have only received graces of this kind the advice given by Saint Jane de Chantal will not seem very practical. As they have no experience of the eminent graces of infused love, of passive and persistent union with God, they will have to exclude their own case if they are to understand the holy foundress's advice, and what

kind of souls it was addressed to. We have thought it necessary to make this observation first of all. It is the more opportune in that if persons who do not receive mystical graces were to try to apply to themselves most of the counsels given by Saint Jane de Chantal, they would be harmful to them. A like error brought great abuses at the end of the seventeenth century and did much to cause distrust of mystical ways.

Saint Jane de Chantal is not ignorant of the more common ways of meditation and affective prayer. She knows that they suit beginners, but she also knows and proclaims that when the soul is faithful, these kinds of prayer end in a higher and simpler prayer, which is that of which she most often speaks.

Summary of Her Doctrine

After these preliminaries, let us hear what she says. This is her advice

"Let us return to prayer. I think that simplicity is absolutely necessary for that exercise. He goes surely who goes simply. We must, then, seek God in the simplicity of our hearts, by a pure intention and familiar converse with His divine goodness, accompanied by a great and holy reverence. For the ingenuities of the human mind are only harmful, and make us walk in our ways and not in God's. Our Blessed Father used to say that women had not much capacity for making great considerations, but that those who are entering religion and are not yet accustomed to this holy exercise must none the less begin in that way, for it is most important in this beginning to impress the truths of faith well upon their minds by the gentle and simple consideration of them that they ought to make.

"The most ordinary and useful subjects are Our Lord's life, death, passion, and resurrection, in order to draw a holy imitation from them. And after we have placed ourselves in the presence of God, as our Blessed Father teaches in Philothea, by a simple act of faith in His omnipresence in all places, hiding ourselves in His divine goodness like a little chicken under its mother's wing, or withdrawing wholly into ourselves to look on Him in our hearts (for we are taught that He dwells there with a more special presence), and in short as each finds easiest according to her attraction; being, I say, in the presence of God, and after profoundly humbling ourselves and asking His divine assistance, we ought to begin quite gently and simply to consider our first point, passing as soon as we can to the colloquy by words of affection on the subject proposed. And when the affections are aroused, we should not multiply words, but stop a little, enjoying them and imprinting them gently on our hearts by a simple gaze at what Our Lord does in the mystery, and from time to time saying a few words to Him according to the subject, either of love, or of abandonment, or of compunction, and the like, as we are moved to speak. But they should be said quite gently and frankly, letting them flow gently into His divine Heart,

as if we would be heard by none but Him alone. And when we see that this affection is spent, we must try to arouse some other by simple consideration, or by the colloquy on the second or third point we set ourselves, and thus pass the rest of our prayer.

"Those who are in aridity can make all the acts of prayer. Even if it is without enjoyment or feeling, it will not be without use and profit; for the prayer of patience, submission, and abandonment to the good pleasure of God, that they should practise in this case, will not be less pleasing to His divine Majesty, nay, will be more pleasing, than if they were dissolved in sweetness. They should persevere in keeping themselves in God's presence with profound reverence and devout bearing, suffering their troubles lovingly. For it is true that when dryness and inability to act are great, the poor soul in that impotence can do nothing but suffer. But that pure suffering is a prayer very pleasing to God when it is accompanied by humility, submission, and trust, and is content with His will alone, and with the honour of remaining in His holy presence, as a slave before his lord, as a poor man before his rich sovereign, as one impotent before the Omnipotent, as a disciple with his good master, as a bride with her bridegroom, as a daughter at her father's feet, and like affections, as the Holy Spirit suggests, saying some words to Our Lord from time to time according to the state she is in. And I know that when they are said with loving submission they are profitable, and we can always say them, although without relish. But then it is not our own taste that we should seek, but that of God Who wills us to be thus.

"We must always finish our prayers with acts of abandonment, submission, love, and confidence in God, with a firm resolve that with the help of His grace we will amend and faithfully practise the affections and resolutions that He has given us. And you must add the rest that you know, the acts of thanksgiving, offering, and petition, as our Blessed Father teaches in the Introduction. And he used to say that we should not leave that method of prayer of our own accord and that it is very good and useful, only that we should try to simplify it more and more as we make progress, conversing gently with Our Lord according to the subject we have chosen, as friend talks with friend, by loving colloquies. For to render our prayer pleasant and useful we must think and treat of God's

mysteries with God Himself. This way is very good, our Blessed Father used to say, because it is more purified from the objects of the senses.

"And if the soul corresponds by the faithful practice of the virtues, which is the fruit of good prayer, it will not stay at that. For I must needs say simply what I had for good reason kept back, but the necessity of souls forces me to say frankly, and that is, that the farther I go, the more clearly I see that Our Lord leads almost all the Daughters of the Visitadon to the prayer of a very simple unity and simplicity of the presence of God by a complete abandonment of themselves to His holy will and to the care of His divine Providence. Our Blessed Father called it the prayer of simple surrender (*simple remise*) to God, which, he said, was very holy and salutary, and included everything that could be desired for the service of God. Now I know that it is nevertheless strongly attacked by those whom God leads by the way of discursive meditation, and many of our Sisters have been troubled by them, being said to be idle and wasting their time. But without wishing to fail in the respect that I owe those persons, I assure you, my dearest Sisters, that you ought not to leave your course for such reasonings. For our Blessed Father, who excellently understood all kinds of prayer, as we see in his writings, always approved this kind, and also said that whilst others eat divers meats at Our Lord's table, we should rest our souls and all our affections on His loving breast by a quite simple trust. With such solid advice, we should remain firm and follow that way faithfully once we are drawn to it. For we should not undertake it of our own accord, but wait humbly and patiently for the time that our divine Saviour has destined to introduce us to that happiness. For after all, to go to God and to reach Him, we must leave ourselves to the leading of His Spirit. What He chooses is always best for us.

"Now there are different degrees in that manner of prayer, as in all others, some possessing that simple unity and repose in much more eminent degree than the others and receiving different fights in them. But that is what they all come to in the end, almost without knowing they are there. And it seems that God guides souls in no other way to bring them to the end of the journey, and that in it we find and receive all the fight and strength we need for everything.

And this attraction is so suited to us that souls drawn away from it seem to leave their centre, to lose liberty of spirit, and to enter into a certain constraint and entanglement that take their peace from them and greatly delay them on their road. Walk, then, henceforward in this divine way, my dearest Sisters, with very humble boldness, and without ceremony or labour, except to follow the attraction of God very simply and faithfully, each being content with her lot without desiring more.

"Those who are led by this way are in duty bound to have great purity of heart, meekness, submissiveness, and total dependence on God. They ought to simplify their mind very much in everything, cutting off all reflection on past, present, and future; and instead of looking at what they are doing or will do, they should look at God, forgetting everything, so far as they can, for this continual memory, uniting their spirit to His goodness in everything that happens to them from moment to moment, and that with great simplicity. There is something else I must say:

"It often happens that souls that are in this way are troubled by many distractions and remain without perceptible support, for Our Lord withdraws from - them the sense of His sweet presence and every kind of inward help and light, so that they remain in complete powerlessness and insensibility, although sometimes in less degree. This is rather astonishing to souls who are not yet very experienced. But they should remain steadfast, and rest in God above all sight and feeling, suffering, receiving, and cherishing, all the ways and workings it may please God to do in them, sacrificing and abandoning themselves without reserve to the power of His love and most holy will, without seeing, or wanting to see, what they are doing or ought to do. But above all their ways and their own knowledge they should unite themselves with God and lose themselves in Him with the highest point of their spirit, and so find peace in the midst of war and rest in labour. In short, we should stay in the state in which God puts us, to be patient in difficulty and to endure in suffering.

"Moreover the certain sign of a good prayer is that it produces the fruits of true virtues in exact observance, and that the soul is as constant in fidelity to good works amidst desolations and bitterness

as when it is in possession of divine favours and consolations. Blessed is the soul that keeps on loving and persevering in this holy exercise despite every difficulty; for that is where it will be enriched and receive the bread of grace, which will make it grow in eternal life. Now of all gifts, that of holy prayer especially cannot be obtained except from God. That is why we should ask it of Him continually with deep humility and without ever wearying" (*Answers on the Customary: Of Retreats*).

The Three Degrees of Prayer

The pages we have just quoted would seem to summarize the teaching of Saint Jane de Chantal; those we shall now quote will make it clearer. First let us see how she distinguishes further the degrees of prayer that she has already put before us. We shall identify the prayer of meditation, affective prayer, and mystical prayer.

"There are three ways of praying.

"The first way is by using our imagination, as when we picture the divine Jesus in the crib, in the arms of His Holy Mother and the great Saint Joseph; when we behold Him between an ox and an ass, and then see how His Mother lays Him in the crib and then takes Him up again to give Him her virginal milk, and feed that Son Who is her Creator and her God. But we should not strain our minds by trying to picture all this in detail and wanting to imagine what sort of eyes the holy Baby had and how His mouth was formed, but call the mystery to mind quite simply. This way of meditating is good for those whose minds are still full of worldly thoughts, to the end that when the imagination is filled with these objects it may drive away every other thought.

"The second way is by using consideration, recalling to our minds the virtues Our Lord practised: His humility, patience, sweetness, love of His enemies, and so with the others. Our will in these considerations will feel all stirred in God and will produce strong affections from which we should draw resolutions for our daily conduct, trying always to attack the passions and inclinations by which we are most liable to fall.

"The third way is to keep ourselves simply in God's presence, gazing on Him in some mystery with the eyes of faith and conversing with Him by words full of confidence, heart to heart, yet so secretly as if we would not have even our guardian angel know of it. When you are in dryness and seem unable to say a single word, do not stop talking to Him, but say: Lord, I am poor dry earth, where no water is; give Thy grace to this poor heart. Then remain respectfully in His

presence without ever worrying or being disquieted for any dryness that may happen. This way of praying is more subject to distractions than the way of reflection, and if we are very faithful Our Lord will give the way of union of the soul with Him. Let each follow the way to which she is drawn.

"These three kinds of prayer are very good. So let those who are drawn to the imagination follow it, and likewise those who are drawn to consideration, and to the simplicity of the presence of God; yet as for this third kind, we should on no account take to it of our own accord if God does not draw us to it" (*Works of Saint Chantal, Vol. II, Conference 32*).

In the next Conference, Saint Jane de Chantal again speaks first of the prayer of beginners and then of affective prayer:

"I protest that I have no other aim or desire than that we should stay quiet and peaceful with Our Lord during prayer, and that those who are beginning to make it should use their imagination, because their minds are usually full of the world, their relations, and other vanities. When they meditate on the mysteries of the Passion, let them impress vividly on their minds the tortures that Our Lord suffered for us; for example, when they consider the Scourging they should picture the mystery as though they were actually present. By this picture well impressed on their minds they will tear from them the difficulties and cares of earthly things.

"But when souls begin to make progress, they should be led by a greater truth, which is, that Our Lord suffers no more, but has suffered, to make them speak words about what He suffered for love of us and remain in that simple thought. . . . When we meditate on the Scourging, and see Our Lord suffering that cruel torment, we must say: O my Lord, how couldst Thou so humble Thyself as to suffer these blows? Then, if you feel your affection stirred by this alone, you should stop there; and afterwards, when the affection is spent, you should say others, according to your attraction."

The holy foundress did not like to see souls who practised this affective prayer get disturbed and lose calm. She knew that nature often plays too great a part in such excessive fervour, and this is an

obstacle to the action of grace:

"There are souls who pray with such alacrity and eagerness that it is a great pleasure to see them; they become so inflamed in their speaking that they hardly give themselves time to breathe. They say. Lord, Lord 1 with such affection that it seems as if they wanted to melt and be dissolved before Him. We should not do that, but pray very calmly and gently. When we go to it, we should prostrate ourselves before Our Lord in the spirit of humility, and gently take up our point until our affection is moved, and we should never be surprised if we have no feelings in prayer, for that is not what God requires of us; but He does require that we should be gentle, peaceful, and humble. If, then, when we leave our prayer, we feel no affection, we must say to Our Lord: 'It is true, O my God, that I feel no affection; yet will I none the less be exceedingly gentle with our Sisters,' and we should leave our prayer with that affection of gendeness. And so doing, although we have no consolation in prayer, we shall still be gentle and calm."

Saint Jane de Chantal has, then, given full instructions in this Conference to those who are in affective prayer; but she is far from forgetting those whom God calls to loving union:

"If God fills our mind at the beginning of prayer, there is no need to go and look for our point, but we should simply stay near Him without making the imagination work so much or uttering many words, for that usually prevents our receiving good affections, in which true prayer consists; in fact, we only make considerations in order to stir up our affection. Now it sometimes happens that the soul is employed upon some of the divine attributes, as, for example, the greatness, goodness, and power, and so of the others; we should be careful to walk in this way so long as God calls to it. But when He takes away this simple and loving sight, the soul feels itself all cold again and heavy at heart; then it must open the door to words of love and submission, and, at other times, of adoration and acquiescence in His divine will."

Let us also quote other advice suitable for souls that have not yet come to the mystical state:

"I do not find fault with those who make considerations; on the

contrary, I often tell you, my dear Sisters, that great evils befall us for lack of reflection on our obligations and what God has done for us. But what I do find fault with is, that souls whom God draws to Himself by a great simplicity should nevertheless be unable to stop there, but always be wanting something. And there are others, whose minds are subtle, and who labour when they meditate to make enquiries that are as inquisitive as they are useless.

"The considerations that I praise are these: considering that Our Lord died for us, that He prepares His eternity for us, that He is with men in the most holy Sacrament until the end of time; the four ends of man, the excellence of the virtues and of the religious life, the vanity of the world: all this strikes home.

"The considerations that I find fault with in Daughters of the Visitation and do not like them to use in prayer are, for example: considering how the star led the three kings to adore the Child Jesus, trying to think what a star is, in what heaven they are placed, whence they derive their light, whether they have local motion or are motionless, how big they are, whether the one that guided the Magi was natural or miraculous, and the like. . . . Let us not so misuse our time in prayer, my dear Sisters, nor talk to the stars; let us rather make some act of thanksgiving to the eternal Father because all things, heaven, earth, the stars, and all creatures, honour and serve His adorable Son Jesus. Then let us follow the star of inspiration and divine attraction that calls us to the Crib, and go there to adore and love the Child Jesus and offer ourselves to Him" (*Conference 34*).

"In prayer we must question our heart, whether it has the virtue or vice that we are meditating on; or, if we are meditating on the Passion of Jesus Christ, we must ask Him: Lord, what fear or what gain makes Thee endure such cruel torture? At once the soul will hear this answer: Not from fear, for I am omnipotent; nor yet for gain, for I am God; but solely for the love I bear thee. On this word of love the soul will dwell with affection until she finds herself disposed and bound to show her God the love she bears Him, by suffering neglect, contempt, malice, and other mortifications; for to meditate profitably we must ponder attentively the mysteries, and reform our conduct, seeing in what we can conform our actions to

what Jesus Christ did and suffered. For the highest science of prayer and of making good use of it lies more in suffering and humbling ourselves than in feeling liking and sweetness, and then in being faithful to our resolutions" (*Works, Vol. Ill, p. 531*).

"You ask whether when you cannot pray because of distractions, you would not do well to read, as you find more devotion in it. My Daughter, take a book, read three or four lines, and then stop, and when you find you are distracted, read some more, and pass your prayer in this way" (*Instructions given in the Novitiate , VII, Vol. II, p. 534*).

"All that those who begin to give themselves to prayer ought to aspire to, should be to labour to resolve and to dispose themselves by every imaginable effort of mind and heart to conform their will to God's, because the highest perfection to be attained in the spiritual life consists in this single point. . . . It is ridiculous for the soul that is still wounded and full of a thousand imperfections to aspire already to divine enjoyments and holy consolations; as yet it has only acquired the virtues in desire, and it already wants to have their sweetest rewards, which God is wont to give to those who possess them in deed and by long and constant practice. Before aspiring to crowns and glory, my Daughters, we must embrace Our Lord's cross in the dryness that comes to us in prayer" (*Conference 35*).

General Advice For All Prayer

Amongst the counsels given by Saint Jane de Chantal there are some suitable for all prayer: thus she shows how we should prepare for it, how we should make it more with the heart than with the head, how we should bear dryness.

A warning she frequently repeats is, that mortification and prayer go together, and that recollection and mortification are equally necessary for prayerful souls:

"The one good preparation for praying well is to mortify ourselves well, and to keep very recollected with Our Lord throughout the day . . . prayer and mortification are the two chief exercises of Religion. One cannot live without the other" (*Answers on the Customary*).

"All good prayer is produced and preserved by mortification" (*Conference 34*). "Mortification without prayer is very difficult; prayer without mortification is very dangerous" (*Instruction to the Novices, VII, p. 533, Vol. II of the Works of Saint Chantal*). "You should know, my dear Daughters, that prayer ought to be followed by mortification in such a way that as we progress in prayer, so we progress in mortification; and we shall progress in prayer at exactly the same rate as in mortification; I keep returning to that point. Mortification must be the gangway to enter prayer; although it is in prayer that we receive good inspirations, that always comes to us by means of mortification. Outside prayer, we ought to be such as we should wish to be during it. During the day, we must take great care to keep our mind in God, to empty it of everything unprofitable, especially of what is not our business, because when we allow it to wander idly we make it unfit for union with God and prayer" (*Conference 33*).

"Mortification and prayer are the two wings by which the dove flies away into some holy retirement in order to find her rest with God far from the company of men; and as birds would be unable to raise themselves with only one wing, so we should not be persuaded that a devout soul could take flight to rise to God with mortification

alone without prayer. Mortification without prayer is a useless suffering; prayer without mortification is meat without salt, which easily goes bad. It is, then, necessary to give our souls these two wings for taking our flight up to the heavenly court, where we should find satisfaction for our hearts in converse with God" (*Little Treatise on Prayer , Works, Vol. Ill, p. 259*).

"My Daughter, it sometimes happens that we go to prayer after we have been scattered and unrecollected all day; it is no wonder if we are distracted in it, for we thoroughly deserve to be so. We follow our inclinations, we are peevish under obedience, we are neither kind nor good-natured towards our neighbour, and we go boldly to prayer to remain united to God and to have consolations and delights. If we find the door shut, that is very fitting" (*Conference 34*).

Even when the soul is well disposed for prayer, it still ought to prepare at the time of making it:

"The first counsel for prayer, my dear Daughters, is that the soul that would pray should, unless it is extraordinarily drawn and raised to God, prepare itself well, as the wise man says: Before prayer, prepare thy soul, think where thou art going and to whom thou hast to speak.

"So many prayers that are made badly come only from lack of preparation. That preparation is twofold: one remote, and the other proximate. The remote preparation is nothing but peace of conscience, watchfulness over the senses, an ordinary sight of God, inward familiar converse with His divine Majesty, and especially having our souls free from all unruly affections and passions; lastly, we must be stripped of everything that might disturb our mind and conscience and prevent our remaining in recollection and interior freedom.

"We must, my Daughters, strip ourselves completely of everything, and bravely renounce all creatures, applying ourselves to mortification of our passions in order to gain the mastery over them, and crushing their rebellion under our feet. We must force our own will to bear the yoke, our own judgment to be docile, choosing in everything that concerns our interior life to depend on

God. . . .

"The first preparation for prayer is purity of intention, by which we refer everything solely to God's glory; the second, a perfect resignation, making ourselves indifferent to anything that may happen; the third, a true renunciation of our own views, taking to ourselves only what God lays upon us.

"When we go to prayer, we must call back all the powers of our soul into ourselves and say: My soul, you are about to appear before God and treat with Him; let us call a halt to everything else. . . .

"To put yourselves in the presence of God, you will picture Him filling the whole universe, and behold Him in every place, like the air that we know to be everywhere. Sometimes we may consider God all round us, surrounding us on every side, and ourselves in Him, like the fish in the sea and the birds surrounded by the air. Or else we must withdraw ourselves into the secrecy of our heart and there with steadfast and calm eye consider how the divine essence is in our whole soul and fills our whole heart, nay, even how the Father contemplates Himself there, and how the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father and the Son. We may also consider Jesus Christ in the Holy Sacrament of the altar; and to honour Him there, we need only know what faith teaches us, that He is God made man, and that this same humanity is seated at the right hand of the eternal Father. Finally, we must humble ourselves and confess that we are unworthy to speak to God, saying with Abraham: I will speak to my Lord, I who am but dust and ashes.

"When the hour for prayer has come, our spirit, which was awaiting this happy moment with a holy impatience, should at once rise at this signal to receive the honour offered to it, and then invoke the Holy Spirit, the Blessed Virgin, our Guardian Angel, and take some of the Saints as pleaders of our prayer and to remain with us before God" (*Little Treatise on Prayer, Works , Vol. Ill, pp. 259 ff.*).

"The first thing we ought to do in prayer is to humble ourselves before God, acknowledging that we are useless unless He fills us, and then it does not matter in what way we may be there, provided we are exact in it; we are assuredly there according to God's will" (*Conference to the Novices, VII, p. 534*).

Two things are necessary in all prayer: much thought of God and little thought of self.

"To prepare well to pray, we must often bring our mind back to God, considering His goodness, His love, greatness, and infinite Majesty, holding ourselves in profound respect in His divine presence" (*Conference 32*).

"You ask, my Daughter, whether, when you have been guilty of some shortcomings, it would be good to think of them in prayer, to humble yourself for them. Yes, you can do so, but you must do it very simply; for if you were to try to consider your shortcomings in detail and the persons against whom you committed them, there would be some danger of your speaking to creatures instead of to God, and that would be a distraction. It is enough to say: Alas, Lord! Thou knowest my wretchedness! and leave it at that, for He knows it perfectly well without our bringing it before Him minutely" (*Conference 33*).

"As to wanting to think of our sins in prayer, we should on no account do this. A simple humbling of our spirit before God for all our sins without particularizing is quite enough. Ordinarily these thoughts act only as distractions to us" (*Works, Vol. Ill, p. 525*).

Let us note these practical details:

"There is no danger in sitting for a while during prayer when need demands it; but we should not stay like that the whole time of our prayer. (The Sisters were used to kneel all prayer time.) We must not be so self-indulgent. Our Lord likes sometimes to see us fight against sleep the whole of prayer time without trying to escape it: we must bear it, and love our abjection in it" (*Ibid.*).

Prayer is an exercise of love, and not a study; the holy foundress often and earnestly recommended her daughters to pray with their hearts.

We must "perform all our exercises in love and for love, especially prayer, in which we should talk to Our Lord very familiarly of our little needs, placing them before Him, and remaining submissive to whatever He wants of us, and faithfully reject any distractions we

may have in it" (*Works, Vol. Ill, p. 525*). We see that Saint Jane de Chantal would not have us speak of our difficulties unless we make an act of perfect submission at the same time. Indeed, if we do not wholeheartedly accept the pains God is pleased to make us feel, the remembrance of our weariness and difficulties will beget a thousand distractions: only souls that are fully resigned can think of their worries without losing touch with God. This is shown by these further sayings:

"To pray is to raise the mind to God and acquaint Him with all our concerns familiarly, with great reverence, and with more confidence than the most delicate child ever had in its mother, and there talk with our Master and Lord of all things, both high and low, of those of heaven and those of earth, of big things and small, to open our heart to Him and pour it out in Him so that nothing remains in it; to tell Him our labours, our sins, our desires, and everything else that is in the soul, and to rest with Him as with a friend in whom we trust and to whom we disclose all our concerns, good or bad. That is what Holy Scripture calls 'pouring out the heart like water in the divine presence,' manifesting to God not only what is great, but the smallest thing; for since divine Providence governs everything, and we can do nothing good without His help, it is wise to consult God about everything, for from Him must come the good we derive from it. God does not want us to be timid in asking favours of Him" (*Ibid.*).

We have quoted these words in order to show how the holy foundress would have people trustful and familiar with God; but we should observe that she is there speaking of prayer in general; for example, of that which we can practise during the course of the day. In mental prayer, we repeat, we should think little of ourselves and much of God, of His loving-kindness, of His interests, and desire and ask that His kingdom may come:

"I strongly recommend to you, my dear Daughters, prayer of the heart, that is, that which is not made with the understanding, but with the heart. It is made in this way: when we are humbled before God and placed in His presence, let us not force our brain to make considerations, but use our affections, arousing them as much as possible; and if we cannot arouse them by interior words, we must

use vocal, such as these: I give Thee thanks, O my God, for that Thy loving-kindness allows me to be here, before Thy face, I who am but naught. Or, at another time: O my Lord, grant me the grace to learn to speak to Thee, for I esteem this happiness above every other. Finally, we should set about prayer with much simplicity; but as for those who take Our Lord in the Garden of Olives and lead Him to Calvary, I advise them to pause, because they are covering a great deal of ground in a short time and are going too quickly" (*Conference 33*).

"The essence of mental prayer, said our Blessed Father, consists properly in speaking to ourselves and with God, praising and blessing Him for what He is, speaking to Him as a child to its father, a disciple to his master, a vassal to his king, a poor man to a rich man, a criminal to his judge, a wife to her husband; in short, as to our faithful friend, like an ignorant person who remains in humble silence, not knowing how to speak, begging for divine treasure at the gate of the heavenly court. . . .

"We must be constant in prayer and never give it up; for in this game, he who gives it up, loses. If you do not seem to be heard, cry out louder still; if you are driven out at one door, go in by the other; if you are told like the woman of Canaan that you do not deserve the favour you are asking, confess that you do not aspire to choice graces, but only to eat the crumbs that fall from the divine table.

"It is only the heart that is necessary for prayer, and as without that everything else is only empty show, so with that alone we shall never lack anything. . . .

"The dryness that we feel in prayer has no source but lack of love for God: the soul that loves, easily busies itself with what it loves. If the mind says nothing, let us make the heart speak; even if we said nothing to God except that we love Him and that He is worthy to be loved, that would be enough, with Him there is no need of so much talking. The angels in heaven say only one word, Sanctus. That is all their prayers, and in the regions of blessedness they are busied with that single utterance out of homage to the unique utterance of God in eternity" (*Works , Vol. III, pp. 262 ff.*).

The holy foundress has just mentioned aridities and told us that they are often caused by lack of love. They may also be the consequence of the soul's infidelities:

"Our Lord usually takes the sweetness of devotion away from souls who offend Him wilfully, even in small things, and they remain dry and arid with no feeling of God in their prayers and spiritual exercises" (*Works, Vol. Ill, p. 462, Sayings on Prayer*).

But aridities are also often a trial willed by God for the advancement of the faithful soul:

"With regard to aridities, in which it seems to the soul that all knowledge is obscured and its powers so weak that they are no longer good for anything, we must then recognise that divine Providence, from motives of justice and mercy that we could not understand, allows that kind of painful state to put the faithfulness of His servants to the test, to make them produce, in the darkness and storm of aridity, the balm of humility, of resignation, of patience, of true contempt of self, and lastly to make them realise what God and His aid are to a soul when the sun of His grace withdraws from within it.

"The drynesses which beginners in the spiritual life may call insipid and hidden grace, are more precious than the greatest consolations, because experience teaches us that all virtues grow under aridities and trials, like corn under snow, and that under this darkness God hides His hand to correct negligences effectively and cause the soul to make notable progress in virtues" (*Ibid., p. 461*).

"Although we are in great dryness of spirit, we can still make acts of trust in God, both in prayer and out of it, such as: O God, Thou art my Father, and all my trust is in Thee. If there is no relish and feeling, it will not be unprofitable" (*Conference 36*).

If aridities are often a means of progress, a trial sent by God to His friends, yet we should not be proud of them or let them make us vain, nor, on the other hand, should we bewail them:

"There is some lack of humility in making so much of serving God by aridities and complaining of them so much; God gives them to us

to make us humble and not to exalt or disturb us. It is the devil who would like to lead us to make this bad use of them. Yet we should compassionate and console those who are suffering great interior troubles. A soul that is humble is as peaceful and submissive to God amidst desolations and interior sterilities as if she were in a sea of enjoyments, consolations, and interior pleasures, which God often gives to the weak. . . . We should not even fear temptations, for God allows them in order to purify our hearts; and even if it happens that we commit some faults in them, we should confess them, humble ourselves for them, and remain in peace. . . . We, whom people think so perfect, are often attacked by so many distractions that it is pitiful; but God allows it to make us humble" (*Conference 35*).

Mystical Prayer

The teachings of Saint Jane de Chantal hitherto quoted apply chiefly to ordinary kinds of prayer, but, as we have seen in the pages in which we found the summary of her doctrine, the holy foundress teaches that if the soul faithfully corresponds with grace and truly practises virtue, it will not stay there, but will receive the gift of a simpler prayer. In this the soul, finding itself united to its God, will simply remain in that union, yielding entirely to God's good pleasure and being content to look on Him with love. Of that prayer, which was her own, Saint Jane de Chantal very often speaks to her Daughters. She knew that they were called to it; we have quoted her words. Here, moreover, is what she wrote to a Superior of her Order: "I say in the *Answers* that I have found that the almost universal attraction of the Daughters of the Visitation is to a very simple presence of God by a complete abandonment of themselves to holy Providence. I might even have left out the word 'almost'; for truly I have found that all who apply themselves to prayer from the beginning as they should, and do their duty in regard to mortification and the practice of the virtues, come to it. Many are drawn to it at the first, and it seems that God uses this way alone to bring us to our object and to the perfect union of our souls with Him. In short, I hold that this way of prayer is essential to our little congregation, and that it is a great gift of God and calls for infinite gratitude" (*Works, volume 3, page 337*).

"My dear Sisters," she said at another time, "it is certainly true that God draws all the Daughters of the Visitation to Himself by a certain holy simplicity, though in varied ways. Now that attraction is good when it teaches the soul to depend on God alone, to love only God, to obey God alone and in things that are God's, and not our inclinations. I say, and will always say, that when God favours a soul with that holy simplicity and familiarity with Himself, when we see that it is thereby made more humble and observant, we ought never to turn it away from it, nor should it ever turn away, however good other ways may seem to it; for what good is more desirable or better than resting wholly in God? I say that is the true way and the true sanctity of the soul; if it turns from that way, it runs the risk of resisting God and causing Him to withdraw from it;

and afterwards it will have great difficulty in going back to where it was - indeed, I do not know whether it will go back" (*Conference 29, Works, volume 2, page 322*).

"To stay the mind in God is the most useful occupation the Daughters of the Visitation can have. They ought not to trouble about the considerations, conceptions, imaginations, and speculations, of others, though they should honour them as things of God that lead to God Himself; it should suffice them to be with God in the simplicity of their hearts" (*Conference 34*).

In a passage quoted above, we saw that everybody did not approve this kind of prayer, that opponents had been met with, who had troubled the Sisters, reproaching them with waste of time, and that the Saint appealed to the authority of Saint Francis de Sales, who, on the contrary, strongly recommended that prayer. Saint Teresa had met with the same opposition (*Life, XIII, Way of Perfection, XXX*), and Saint John of the Cross had severely condemned those who turned souls away from these contemplative ways. Saint Jane de Chantal feared for her Daughters the narrow direction of these enemies of mysticism: "You must never go and say to those Fathers in religion to whom we sometimes speak, 'I do nothing in prayer '; for those who are led by that way of loving simplicity do nothing by activity, but they do a great deal by possession. When God draws the soul to make her repose on His loving breast, she should never be turned thence, and they who do so do not know what harm they do that soul, nor how they displease God" (*Conference 34*).

But to the holy foundress, as to other masters, it is not less disastrous if we take it upon ourselves to practise this mystical prayer before we are led into it by Our Lord. We have already heard her say to us several times: we must not take to it of our own accord if God does not draw us to it. Elsewhere she gives us to understand that this prayer is only for those who give themselves up to the practice of holy indifference, for she shows that the smallest attachments are an obstacle to it. She never separates the advice that she gives for the prayer of simple attention (*simple regard*) from that by which she urges perfect renunciation, and we know that she is talking to souls capable of understanding that complete abnegation and already practising it.

"Let us not think that we have done anything until we have stamped Jesus Christ crucified on our hearts. That disposition and continual devotion obtain for us from God grace not to follow sensual motions and inclinations. A firm resolution not to offend God mortally or venially, and a rejection of all sensual thoughts, so subject the flesh to the spirit that we are rarely tempted, and only weakly, and it is very easy to overcome, if we will. This resolve keeps the passions so subdued that we hardly feel them, so that if it is necessary to hear or speak of them we are no more stirred than if stone or mud were spoken of. We reach this stage only by a special grace of Our Lord after we have fought valiantly; especially must we be very patient and silent in occasions of humiliations and contempt. We must bear the insults of the time, whatever they are, without murmuring; we must bear bodily sufferings, wherever they come from, weariness, needs of any kind, and persecutions. No virtue is perfect unless it is tested by our neighbour. Moreover, we must likewise bear it when men dishonour our relations, brethren in religion, and others; we must bear afflictions in the divine service, such as aridities, distractions, obscurities, timidities, scruples, temptations, persecutions of the devil, ordeals from confessors and ministers of God, and all that without any murmuring, to tempt God. Those who persevere in these practices will at last be admitted and received into the height and sweetness of familiar converse with God by the prayer of union, and then we are greatly rewarded.

"God delays to give souls these favours (of loving union) either because they are buried in their vices, each of which is like a dark mist preventing them from seeing their Creator, or else to make them realise the excellence of what they are seeking by the length of time it takes them to find it. During these delays He tries them in many ways by troubles within and difficulties without, in order that we may learn from this that we are pursuing a great good since it gives us so much trouble" (*Works , Vol. Ill, p. 528*).

So long as the soul, though it made praiseworthy efforts and bravely practised certain virtues, still had the failings to which Saint Jane de Chantal alludes - for example, attachment to comfort, to pleasant pastimes, to success, to the esteem and affection of creatures - it might indeed receive the special aids that arouse love, transient lights that give rise to salutary reflections, swift impulses,

pious desires that encourage its efforts, but it has to employ these special aids by using its powers, drawing conclusions, and trying to produce acts. When, on the contrary, it has perseveringly set itself to refuse the Holy Spirit nothing, to act in future only out of pure love, to do nothing to humour nature, especially when sharp temptations firmly resisted and trials well borne have made it more detached, the graces it begins to receive are no longer ordinary, but eminent. Saint Jane de Chantal explains the nature of these graces, reproducing almost word for word what Saint John of the Cross had said: "In that state, it is God Who works privately, training and teaching; the soul's part is to receive the spiritual blessings given to it, which are attention and divine love together" (*Works, Vol. Ill, p. 278*). Saint John of the Cross had said: "In this state, it is God Who acts and the soul that receives, for God instructs the soul and infuses into it in contemplation very spiritual blessings, which are knowledge and divine love in one. The soul thus sees itself filled with that loving knowledge without reasoning and without making acts" (*Living Flame of Love, Stanza III, 34*). The gifts of the Holy Spirit enlighten it and a pure charity is established in it that keeps it united to its God. Until then, fights of faith and holy impulses were given to it to be used and turned to account; it reasoned, it set about producing acts of love. Henceforward God does not even allow it to do this work any longer, and the soul finds that it is grounded in love without any effort; but it loves freely, for it is glad to love and desirous of loving ever more.

This passive love dwells in the highest part; it may, it is true, extend to the sensitive and reasoning parts, but it often stays in the summit of the will. There it produces a strong and steadfast attachment to God and His holy will, and by this, mystical union, which is so precious, is effected and maintained. Reasonings then seem superfluous and wearisome; the union of love, which establishes deep peace and keen satisfaction in the heart, more than replaces the acts of "love that is aroused" (*amour excite*). Experience proves that this new manner of working of grace, which we find described by the saints and the best mystical authors, occurs in our days as often as formerly, once the requisite conditions have been realised. Then the soul should simplify its intercourse with God and remain passive under the action of the Holy Spirit and abide in love. It is an excellent prayer.

We understand why we should not simplify our prayer in this way, and put ourselves in silence, before we have received these graces of passive love: to suppress the soul's work when love is not there is to enter a state of idleness. On the other hand, when God Himself produces love, to bestir ourselves, to resort to considerations, to force ourselves to make acts with feeling, is to run away from the divine action and deprive ourselves of the most precious fruits of the mystical graces.

[We are aware that some contemporary authors allow a prayer of simple attention (*de simple regard*) that is not mystical. That is not at all the doctrine of Saint Jane de Chantal; most certainly it is not that of Saint John of the Cross. As for Saint Teresa, she speaks more than once, and strongly, against those who want to keep themselves in silence before receiving mystical love (*Life, XII, Interior Castle, Mansion IV, 3*). When she speaks of the prayer of active recollection (*Way of Perfection, XXVIII*), she describes it not as a silent and contemplative prayer, but as an affective prayer in which the soul speaks much to God, in turn as to a father, a brother, a master, a bridegroom. Here again, experience confirms the teaching of these great masters and shows that it would not be wise to depart from it.]

It is, therefore, important to know by what signs the soul will recognise that God is working, and that it should yield to His action. Saint Jane de Chantal gives these signs, and here again she faithfully reproduces the teaching of Saint John of the Cross:

"How shall we know, you ask, my dear Daughter, whether, when we cannot act interiorly, it is God Who is drawing us to simplicity and quietness in His presence? I answer that according to the teaching of spiritual writers there are three indications of it.

"The first is, if we can no longer meditate, and find nothing but dryness in it any more, and if the mind keeps on coming back to the same object despite its efforts.

"The second is, when the heart no longer has any attraction for fixing its imagination and senses on any particular subject, and when that is no longer a help to the practice of virtue.

"The third indication, and the most sure, is, if a soul takes pleasure in being alone in loving attention to God, without any special consideration, in inward peace, quietness, and rest, without labour of the powers, memory, understanding, and will (at least, for any length of time) to go from one subject to another, and remains with only a general and loving attention and gaze.

"We must have these signs if we are to give up meditation and enter that prayer of the presence of God. If the soul is really drawn to it, it ought not to fear that it is going wrong or being useless, even though it seems to do nothing in that attention and is not busied with anything in prayer, as it does not work with the senses; for although the action of the powers of the soul ceases, the intelligence remains. Finally in the case we are dealing with, it is sufficient for you to know that it is enough that the understanding should be stilled from all particular things, whether spiritual or temporal, and that the will should have no inclination to think of either. That, of course, is when the action of grace is only in our intellect; for when it is communicated to the will as well, which always takes place more or less, the soul does not cease to listen, to look, to be busied, to unite itself to the divine action, and goes so far as to lose itself in it, especially as, charmed by love, it does not know whether it is listening or loving.

"In this state, it is God Who is acting privately, training and teaching; the soul's part is to receive the very spiritual blessings given to it, which are attention and divine love together. And since His goodness then deals with the soul as a giver, the soul should go to God with a trustful heart, without making any particular acts except those to which it feels itself inclined by Him, remaining as it were passive, doing nothing of its own accord, with that gaze of simple quietness, as if to open its eyes with a childlike look, with a simple attention thus to join love with love. If we try to act, and leave that very simple and calm loving attention that is without reasoning, we hinder the blessings that God communicates by that attention, which is the only thing He is requiring of us. Hence it follows that the soul should be very untrammelled, passive, and calm, as God is, for in this we need a mind that is very free and annihilated, in order to receive these divine operations. If the soul were to try to dwell on certain thoughts, reasonings, feelings, and

make some act from them, it would only be a distraction to it and turn it from the word that God makes to be heard deep in the heart in that sacred solitude in which all the faculties ought to be in silence, peace, and calm, to hear what God is saying. Now as this peace speaks in it, and when the soul comes to feel itself in silence and listening, its loving gaze ought to be very simple, without care or reflection, so that it forgets almost everything that it may be attentive, in order to be free to do whatever grace discloses to it" (*Works, Vol. Ill, p. 276*).

"Indeed, my dear Daughter, with all my heart would I give you some signs by which you will see whether your rest and quietness is good and from God.

"The first sign, then, will be, if, although you prepare your point like the community, you yet cannot make use of it, but feel that without any contrivance of yours or of those who guide you, your heart, your mind, your inmost soul, are s weedy drawn to this holy rest, peacefully possessing Him Whom by divine grace you have so desired for many years.

"The second, if you notice that this attraction carries you to humility and disparagement of yourself.

"The third, if you learn amidst these sweetnesses and holy rest to belong to God alone, to obey Him and your superiors without reservation; if you learn to depend on divine Providence alone and to will only His holy will.

"The fourth, if this rest makes you leave, and takes from you, every binding affection for creatures and earthly things, to unite and join you only to the love of the Creator; for, my Daughter, it is not reasonable that a soul whose delight is to enjoy God should still delight in the enjoyment of things that are vile and beneath God.

"The fifth, if that leads you to reveal yourself better to your superiors, to be simple, sincere, true, and candid, in short, like a little child.

"The sixth, if notwithstanding the sweetness that you receive from this pleasant rest, you are ready to go back to using the

imagination, to considerations, and even to aridities, when God wills.

"The seventh, if you are more patient and humble in bearing your infirmities, and even more desirous of suffering more, without troubling about other relief or satisfaction than contenting your Bridegroom.

"The eighth, consider shortly, simply, and in general, whether your attraction and loving sleep makes you have more contempt for the world, self-love, self-interest, in a word, whether it does not seem to you to put the world and all its glory and your own self under your feet, and to make you esteem contempt, simplicity, lowness, labours, and the Cross, above all things" (*Ibid., p. 281*).

Varieties of Mystical Prayer

We have already seen several descriptions of mystical prayer given by the holy foundress. In other passages she points out the varieties of it:

"There are some who in prayer can do nothing but hold themselves before God with great honour and respect, and that prayer is good. Others have a thousand kinds of bad thoughts and feelings; that is suffering and enduring, and is still a prayer. Others have many distractions; they must have good patience, and so long as the will is not in the distractions, prayer does not cease to be good. Finally, there are others who go to prayer and find Our Lord as they would, and do whatever they desire with Him; that is the prayer of rest, in which there is more enjoyment than suffering" (*Conference 33*).

In these cases, apparently very different, the same ground persists: there is always, at least in the summit of the will, a loving union with God and His good pleasure; passive love exists, and the signs just given attest its presence. Here are other different varieties of that prayer:

"There is a prayer of calm attention of the soul to God, which reduces too great an activity of the faculties, and establishes it in interior silence and in a rest of its powers. Oh, how good it is to listen more often to God in our hearts than to speak to Him!

"There is a prayer in which, as regards its state, the soul is in this calm and performs no act, and yet it is really disposed to will whatever God does with it, and that love of the will of God is its food.

"There is a prayer by applying the soul to God; that is when it is occupied with God in all its faculties, without being aware of the action of its faculties.

"There is a way of struggles and difficulties; that is when we are weighed down by continual and violent temptations: this way requires great faithfulness to God, with a simple and gentle turning

from the causes of the suffering.

"There is a prayer of poverty and dereliction; that is when the soul cannot form any act, nor even overcome its suffering except by patience and humility. Then let it use these remedies: let it accept its poverty in a spirit of penitence and unite itself to the poverty of the Son of God as homage to the divine justice" (*Works , Vol. Ill, p. 265*).

Practical Rules

How to Prepare for the Prayer of Simple Surrender to God

The graces of passive love, which make this prayer possible, are given, Saint Jane de Chantal told us, to those who have imprinted Jesus crucified on their hearts, who no longer follow their natural inclinations, and accept wholeheartedly the trials of all kinds that God sends them. Thence it follows that the more a soul annihilates its natural will and wills only what God wills, the better it will prepare for that prayer:

"Set your soul at liberty, in peace and calm; withdraw it from the taste and slavery of its own working, and do not disturb it with any care and anxiety, either from above or below, reducing it to solitude; for the sooner it refrains from that, the sooner it will arrive at that holy idleness and calm, and more abundantly . . . God, the sovereign Master, raises a supernatural building in each soul, as pleases Him. Mortify what is natural in you, and annihilate its operations and everything that may thwart God's plans; grace wants to raise that building by means that you cannot know. In this holy idleness affection expands, and it is certain that in it we feel the darts of divine love much more keenly; care (natural solicitudes) closes up the spirit, rest unfolds it. It is necessary that every human affection of the soul should liquefy of its own accord and flow wholly into the will of God; for otherwise how should God be all in the whole man?" (*Works, Vol. Ill, pp. 279, 280*).

"To make a good and perfect prayer, we must forget ourselves and be lost in God; let us not flatter ourselves, God wants this sacrifice from us, and He will not direct us for less. There is no state in which He is better pleased to see us than humiliation. It is not enough to be little before God; we must be nothing: that is the foundation He builds on, for He delights in working on nothingness. The more perfect our annihilation, the greater the things He does" (*Ibid., p. 267*).

Saint Jane de Chantal has just said that we must lose ourselves for God. She gave this advice more than once: "If we are to have the

perfection that God requires of us in our vocation, we must be perfectly mortified in body, heart, and mind; we must lose self utterly with all its seekings and interests, and will nothing but what God wills, and be completely abandoned to His goodness. . . . If prayer, be it as high and exalted as you like, does not produce the fruit of mortification, it is nothing" (*Conference 36*).

"My dear Sister, from what I see, you desire to lose yourself in God. To be lost in God is nothing else than to be absolutely and completely resigned and surrendered into His hands, and abandoned to the care of His adorable Providence. This saying, 'to lose oneself in God has a certain substance in it that I do not think any can fully understand unless they are thus happily lost. The great Saint Paul fully understood it when he said with such assurance, 'I five, yet I five no longer in myself, but it is Jesus Christ Who liveth in me.' How happy should we be. Sisters, if we could truly say, 'It is no longer I that live in myself because my whole life is lost in God and it is He Who lives for me and in me.' To live no longer in ourselves, but lost in God, is the most sublime perfection a soul can reach. We ought all to long for it, losing ourselves again and again a thousand times in the ocean of that infinite greatness. But a soul thus lost is always annihilated before God; it is always content with what God does in it or outside it. Everything that happens to it satisfies it; affliction pleases it, and it beholds it without confusion because it will say: I have lost all consolation in that of being lost in God. . . .

"We should indeed like to lose ourselves, but we should also like it to cost us next to nothing. We tell Our Lord that we abandon ourselves to His divine arms; but we do not do it thoroughly. We still want to keep some little care of ourselves, not so much in temporal things as in spiritual. Self-love is always persuading us with its subtle ingenuity that if we do not give in to it somewhat, things will not go well. A soul wholly lost in God wants to have only the virtue and perfection that God wills it to have. . . . Even if we have given ourselves to God perfectly, it is very easy to take back the gift. And what can we do then, but humble ourselves, and recognise that our loss in God was not complete, since we were so quick to find ourselves again, and after that act of deep humility lose ourselves again once more and cast ourselves into God like a

drop of water into the sea, and lose ourselves well in that ocean of the divine goodness to find ourselves again no more? Every time you happen to take back your gift, my Daughter, go on doing the same thing over again, and if you persevere faithfully in going on giving yourself back again I dare to assure you that you will at last lose yourself with so happy a loss that you will never more find yourself. . . . If we want to lose ourselves for good and all, let us think no more of our hearts or bodies, of ourselves or anything that is not God or for God" (*Conference 37*).

This last counsel, that we should not consider ourselves too much, is one of those which should be given most often, even to fervent souls. The holy foundress took care not to omit it:

"God wants you to be in an extremely passive state," she wrote to one of her Daughters. "Do not consider at all whether you will persevere, whether you are loyal and pleasing to God. Empty yourself of self and of every care, apprehension, weariness, and fear of the duration of that state, in which everything makes you fearful and causes you suffering. Your remedy will be that simple looking upon God and answering nothing, I tell you this once more, and in God's name. You look at yourself too much; trouble yourself no more about your trouble, do not speak to God about it, nor to yourself; never look to see what it is, to tell it or explain it to anybody, and never make self-examination on it. Hide your trouble from yourself and look at God as if you did not feel it. If you can speak to Him, let it be of Himself and not of your trouble. Raise your eyes to heaven and content yourself with saying with a smile full of trust, 'O Eternity, O Eternity!'" (*Works, Vol. Ill, p. 283*).

"Few people are perfectly destitute, because to be perfectly stripped, we must be free from all self-interest that can arise either from nature or from grace (she means by this the pleasures that graces give us). There are few souls willing to undertake this total renunciation and resolve on it in good earnest" (*Ibid., p. 460*).

Lastly, let us give these words to sum up her whole teaching on renunciation: "The most fitting preparation for prayer is to go to it with our heart stripped, and for the soul, as regards all its powers and interior activities, to appear naked before God and submit to His plans, even doing this sometimes by a formal act and a renewed

intention" (*Ibid., pp. 261, 262*).

Preparation for Mystical Prayer and the Struggle Against Distractions

We said that the counsels given by Saint Jane de Chantal for beginning prayer suit every kind of prayer, and, in consequence, the mystical prayer of simple attention. First we must recall the presence of God, and we may profitably consider Him in ourselves. "You must make a little oratory in your heart," said the Saint to her novices, "as did Saint Catherine of Siena, and, like her, gaze there upon Our Lord" (*Works, Vol. II, p. 536*). We must consider God's goodness, His love. His greatness and infinite majesty. If we feel distracted, we must fight against it, and so also in the course of the prayer, if distractions come back. "My Daughters, if distractions do not go away in spite of your repelling them, you must then make the prayer of patience, and say the Pater humbly, or some loving words such as, 'O my good Lord! Thou alone art the support of my soul, Thou art my quietness, my consolation, and my only rest; though I cease to live, yet will I not cease to love Thee, with the help of Thy holy grace.' Thus we must stir up our hearts without waiting until God puts milk or honey into our mouths to speak to His goodness, for He wants us to help ourselves" (*Conference 34*). If we have to fight, it is important to fight bravely: "Those who are faint-hearted in prayer are inviting disaster. We must take special care to fight faint-heartedness, for it greatly injures the soul" (*Conference 33*). "It is certain that distractions are usually multiplied according to the degree of animation of the mind, and that there are minds so restless that they are distracted all through an Office without their will being any guiltier than it is in the dreams they have when they are asleep. Patience on these occasions and a continual longing for God renewed from time to time is often better, I mean, more profitable for the soul, than a very peaceful, calm, and pleasurable attention" (*Works, Vol. Ill, p. 463*). "When the time has come to place ourselves before His divine goodness in order to speak to Him in private. . . we have only, with all simplicity and without violent effort of mind, to hold ourselves before Him with movements of love and an attention of our whole soul without being wilfully distracted. Then all the time that we are on our knees will be accounted as a prayer before God; for He loves

the humble suffering of the idle and involuntary thoughts that attack us just as much as the best thoughts that we had at other times; for one of the most excellent prayers is the loving desire of our heart towards God, and the endurance of things that we dislike. Then it joins patience, which is the first of virtues, and the soul that thus rises from the midst of its distractions should believe that it has prayed as much as if it had not suffered from them in the least" (*Conference 30*). "Believe me, my dear Daughters, bring the greatest calm of heart you can to prayer: shut yourselves up in that little heaven within - of your soul, in which God dwells - without allowing yourselves to be distracted by objects of the senses, and believe that you will never fail to drink of the water from the cistern (*Works , Vol. Ill, p. 261*).

Loving Union and Simple Attention

When the soul that is ready for the prayer of simple surrender to God (*simple remise en Dieu*) - so Saint Francis de Sales often called it - has prepared itself, when it is united to God by the love that He Himself has set in the heart and that it finds in itself, it ought to remain gently in that love. It may first renew its perfect union of will: "The essence of prayer is not in being always on our knees, but in keeping our will united with God's whatever happens. . . . To rest - in God - is very sweet, easy, and pleasant; but to be abandoned to His holy will is much higher, greater, and more exalted, because it involves being ready for whatever God wants of us with perfect indifference" (*Conference 36*).

"When you are in prayer, you must neither see nor hear anything but God; even if an angel came to you, you ought not to look at him, for you are speaking to a greater than he" (*Works, Vol. Ill, p. 267*).

"The great method of prayer is, that there is none, when the Holy Spirit has made Himself master of the person meditating, for He does what He pleases with him, and at that time there are neither rules nor methods. The soul must be in God's hands as clay in the potter's hands for making all kinds of vessels, or as soft wax for receiving the imprint of the seal, or as a white tablet on which the Holy Spirit writes His divine wishes. If, when we go to prayer, we could make ourselves pure capacity to receive the Spirit of God, that would suffice for all method: prayer should be made by grace and not by ingenuity (that is, we should depend more on God's help than on methods). . . . (*Vol. Ill, p. 260*). If in prayer the soul feels certain touches of God, by which He shows that He wishes to communicate Himself to it, it should then cease all working and stop short, to give way to His coming and not hinder it by actions performed out of season, but dispose itself to receive Him with interior silence and deep respect. Sometimes, when it feels His approach, the soul will be able to say: Speak, Lord, for Thy servant heareth, and then calmly open wide its heart and acquiesce in the infusion of grace, which it must turn to account according to the impulses received in prayer" (*Ibid., p. 262*).

"Look on God and leave Him to act. That is all you have to do, and the only exercise God requires of you, to which He alone has drawn you. It is also that which Our Blessed Father told me to practise invariably, and I recommend to you in his name. Keep your mind very simply and steadily without effort or act in that simple sight and single attention to God, completely abandoned to His holy will, without wanting to see, feel, or make acts about it, and remain there peaceful and at rest, trustful and patient, without considering to see how you are there, or what you are doing, feeling, or suffering there, what the soul is doing, what it has done, or will do, or what will happen to it in any occurrence or any event. You must not move from there, for that single attention to God includes everything, particularly in suffering. . . . As soon as you see your mind outside that, gently bring it back without any act, glance, or reflection about anything or in anything: one thing only is necessary, and that is, to have God" (*Works , Vol. Ill, p. 287*).

"In prayer there is more listening than speaking to be done: it is for us to listen to the Son of God, and not to speak; we are not worthy to speak before Him. Let us leave the choice of subject to God without making efforts to find one ourselves. God only speaks to the heart in recollection. You say, my dear Daughter, that you have no thoughts, no feelings of God; what have you to do with anything else, what more can you desire?

"You are at prayer and God gives you nothing: if you cannot do anything else, worship His presence, His ways, and His workings; for that, you need no great thoughts. You worship Him better by silence than by speech. If you cannot do anything at all, endure; if you do not pray by doing, you will pray by suffering. In these extremities turn to the Blessed Virgin, or any saints; pray them to pray for you, or to give you a share in their continual prayer in heaven. … If you did nothing but remain in the presence of God and spend your life before Him, like a candle burning before the Blessed Sacrament, would you not be blessed?" (*Ibid., pp. 266, 267*). "If we could truly say, My God is my all, we should never be wearied in prayer, for if we were wearied, these words well said would charm away the weariness" (*Ibid., p. 264*).

"Observe, my Daughter, that as soon as the soul begins to enter this

simple and idle state, it ought not to busy itself with meditations at any time or season, nor expect spiritual sights or feelings, but stay quite upright without support, its spirit free from desire for every gift whether present or absent" (*Ibid., p. 279*).

The holy foundress, then, would have the soul, once it has been introduced into the mystical way, give up meditations and not seek for feelings; nor should that soul have recourse any more to representations or pictures, but remain simply united to God, Who is pure spirit. In that again Saint Jane de Chantal reproduces Saint John of the Cross.

"The wisdom of God, to which the understanding must be united, has neither form nor image that can touch the senses and the intelligence; but as in order to obtain that perfect union of the soul and the divine wisdom there must be a certain resemblance and likeness between them, it follows that the soul must be pure and simple, not limited nor restricted by any form or image that would stop that union between spirit and spirit.

"The perfection of the memory is for it to be so absorbed in God that the soul forgets everything and itself and rests sweetly in God alone, far from all din of thoughts and wayward imaginings. The more we empty the memory of forms and striking things that are not the Divinity or God made man - for the remembrance of these is always helpful, as is He Who is the true way, the guide and the author of all good - the more we shall place it in God, and we shall keep it empty in the hope that He will fill it. Therefore what the soul must do in order to live in pure and full presence of God is this: as often as forms and distinct images present themselves, it must at once turn to God, and always with loving affection, neither thinking of those things nor considering them, except so far as duty obliges, and then without relishing them or caring for them for fear they should leave any stain or mire in the faculties. But you ought not to give up thinking and remembering what you have to do, and, provided it is without affection, attachment, and self-interest, that will not hurt you" (*Ibid., p. 280*).

"In whatever disposition the soul may be, whether it be fear or any other, it ought to remain simple in the simple attention. If it does not see it or feel it, it has faith to assure it of the omnipresence of

God, before Whom it should remain peaceful and submissive without taking any notice of its thoughts. . . . It should receive passively the good thoughts, lights, and reflections that God gives it, but without moving or turning aside from God, and when He arouses it to speak, it should follow the attraction very simply and briefly. . . . When God gives nothing, it must be content to remain peaceful and in reverence towards His goodness without fear (of falling into carelessness on that account). And when it feels these fears (of acting thus out of carelessness), it should keep united to God in that suffering, which is the gift of His goodness.

"The soul must always follow the interior attraction and produce all the acts when God arouses them, but not otherwise. It is self-love that would like to make acts of submission and acceptance, when it is deprived of feelings, in order to satisfy itself; but simple attention, or keeping still and at rest before God, though the soul has neither sight nor feeling of His goodness, is what God wants of the soul, without its bestirring itself, or being eager to seek or try to penetrate: all these seekings are only self-love" (*Ibid., pp. 268 ff.*).

"When we are drawn to a great simplicity in prayer, we should not be upset if we cannot busy ourselves with thoughts of the great mysteries at the great feasts, for we must always follow our attraction. Outside prayer, we can make these thoughts and consider these mysteries simply, or read them; for even if we do not make great considerations, we still feel in ourselves certain sweet affections of imitation and joy, or others. And for prayer, the great secret is always to follow in it the attraction that is given us. How many souls there are who trouble themselves at times about their prayer in order to be able to make it well, and yet there is nothing to do but to follow the attraction; and the purer, simpler, and more denuded of object, prayer is, the more excellent and perfect it is, for God is spirit and a very simple essence. That is why the more tenderly and simply the soul deals with Him, the more capable it is of being united to Him.

"When you need light in important matters, you must ask God for it, and if it comes to you in prayer, you can preserve it, yet without turning from attention to God" (*Conference 36*).

If the holy foundress insisted so strongly that her Daughters should

practise that prayer of very calm, silent, loving union for which they were ready, it was because she knew how salutary such prayer is. Her teachings on this point recall those of Saint John of the Cross. To the assurances that she has already given let us add these: "When God finds in a soul an understanding that is annihilated, He gives it great graces, and communicates very special lights and favours to it; nay, that very annihilation is one of the greatest graces a soul can receive" (*Works, volume 3, page 459*). "What God works in the soul in that divine leisure and solitude is an inestimable good, more than you can think" (*Works, volume 3, page 279*).

"This loving sleep is better than any other food; and I tell you that although your soul seems to you to sleep, it still takes nourishment and eats, and very good and delicate foods at that; but the fact is, that it is so very attentive to the loving Jesus Who is feasting it that it does not occupy itself with the banquets that He gives it" (*Ibid., p. 283*). "Our Blessed Father used to say that those who abide in the presence of God with simplicity rest on His bosom whilst the others are seeking many other things, taking that comparison from Saint John, who slept lovingly on the Saviour's breast whilst the others were eating various meats at the table of the same Saviour, and adding 'that it is better to sleep on that holy pillow than to keep awake in any other position '" (*Conference 62*).

Aridities and Their Advantages

Loving union is often given with consolation: it is so sweet to love and to love our God; but when it is practised only in the summit of the will, and all the rest of the soul remains insensible, the soul, which strains instinctively to love with all its powers, suffers, and often suffers greatly; it is tempted not to be content with so dry a love, and to replace the simple attention by outbursts of affection that seem to it more perfect and sweeter. Saint Jane de Chantal, who was herself so often tormented by aridities, could give very wise advice on this point. She well shows all that the soul gains by crossing these deserts. She wrote:

"The divine guide, in order to make you rise to a higher perfection, has taken your faith, hope, and love towards His divine goodness, your confidence, abandonment, and rest that you had in Him, and all the interior powers of your soul, and He has thrown all these precious blessings that He had set in you into the alembic and into the fire of His divine and most pure love, in order to burn up and destroy in you every kind of pleasures, satisfactions, and contentments - not earthly pleasures, for all that was done long ago, but this divine Master wants to destroy in you even the pleasure you had from having in yourself all these gifts of grace with which He had endowed you; and, as He gave them to you, He has taken them away, so far as feelings go, in order that He alone may fill your soul, and not His gifts. . . . In these tortures your whole fear is of offending God, of not being pleasing to Him, and of not being able to serve and glorify Him eternally. I assure you, in His name to Whom you have been consecrated for so long, that this state is more pleasing to Him than if He kept you rapt to the third heaven and if you had all the enjoyment and feeling of the virtues of which God has stripped you, for you have all these virtues really and in substance, but you have neither the consciousness nor the feelings of them. That is why you have them more purely, more perfectly, and in higher degree. That state is like what our Blessed Father says of contemplation, which is, as it were, the quintessence of the flowers from which they extract perfume: so your love of God, your faith, your hope, are the greater for being separated from all consolations and satisfactions in feeling" (*Works, Vol. Ill, pp. 284,*

285).

"Be of good courage, my Daughters, for it is the characteristic of solid virtue that it is acquired and practised with many difficulties. Believe me, in the spiritual life aridities and vexations are great means of increasing the pure love of God in us, and His object in all our sufferings is to raise our soul above itself. . . . When we feel those great loathings for all outward things in our soul, it is then that it begins to detach itself from creatures in order to attach itself to God alone, its only consolation, and very happy is the necessity that forces us to rest perfectly in Him like this" (*Conference 26*).

"It is with the Spirit of God for Whom we ask in prayer as with the Body of God that the priest produces by the Consecration. Each is necessary for us, and was promised to us by Jesus Christ Our Lord for the nourishment of our souls; and yet neither with the priest nor with us is there ordinarily any taste or feeling of it when we receive Communion and faith teaches us that we have received the Body of Jesus Christ; but we assimilate it (if I may use the word) by faith, being certain on the word of God, though we have not seen or felt or tasted it, that it none the less nourishes our souls, and produces in them effects of light and strength amidst the darkness and aridities that it has left in us after we have received it. . . . I know there are people who are united to God, who have prayed for many years without having any sensible consolation, and nevertheless have always seemed insensible in great temptations. They were so resolute when it was a question of serving God and giving Him tokens of their obedience and love that nothing could shake them, for they counted themselves happy to receive nothing in feeling, and to feel and endure all kinds of sufferings and labours for God" (*Conference 30*).

"When we are forsaken by everything else, then are we least forsaken by God. He is never more moved to succour us than when He sees us deprived of everything, and how much more when He deprives us of Himself. Then what does it matter if we are forsaken by God, so long as we are heard by Him!" (*Works, Vol. Ill, pp. 267, 268*).

How We Should Behave in Aridities

As soon as these inmost trials, aridities, or powerlessness, are willed by God for our good, we ought to accept them from His hand and always bless that divine good pleasure.

"When the soul is so overwhelmed that it hardly knows what to do with itself nor how to behave, not so much because of passing thoughts as because of a rough and bitter dryness that takes away almost all its power to act, then God is making it suffer in a much higher way. It should make the prayer of reverence, of submission and suffering, of conformity, of poverty of spirit, holding itself before God like a poor man before his supreme deliverer. It should say: O my Lord, I am a dry land, all dried up and cracked by the violence of the north wind and the cold; but, as Thou seest, I ask Thee for nothing more; Thou wilt send me both dew and warmth when it pleaseth Thee" (*Conference 34*).

"That diversity of condition that you feel in prayer (being sometimes in sweetness, sometimes in aridity) is nothing but good, and indeed necessary; but when you are consoled in it do not waste time in examining inquisitively whence your consolations come. Provided that they produce good effects in you, which are humility, mortification, kindness, and holy joy, rest content with that. When you are dry and disconsolate in it, love your desolations out of respect for Him Who sends them to you or allows them to come, and lovingly unite your will to His" (*Works, Vol. Ill, p. 459*).

"The true way of serving God is to walk by a way that we know not; and when it seems that everything is upside-down in the soul, provided that it remains faithful to the practice of the virtues amidst all that, it ought not to strive to know what its way is or even to think of it; but it should walk simply in perfect abandonment and renunciation of itself to God. Oh, my Daughters, how happy you are to suffer, if you suffer with love!" (*Conference 26*).

"When God takes the sweetness of His presence from us, and seems to have forsaken us like His divine Son on the Cross, so that we feel

no longer any strength or help, then is the time not to lose courage, but to continue steadfast in our desolation and rely on the words of Jesus Christ in which all our strength is hidden: 'Thy will be done!' How pleasing is this word to God! Happy is the soul that can say it heartily in that state!" (*Works, Vol. Ill, p. 461*).

Then we must rather accept than complain, and even when we ask Our Lord to have pity on His creature we must still say: Thy will, not mine, be done. "It is a sign of simplicity, and even of love for God, to make our requests to Him without wanting to force Him to give, except as much and in so far as He pleases. He is delighted with the prayer of a soul that is so simple, so humble, so subject to His will, as we are delighted when we see a poor man ask (alms) of us without being put out by our refusal. Indeed, however importunate he is, or rather, however long he stays before us, only looking at us with lowered eyes, are we . not touched when he goes away after spending so long in waiting for us?

It is of the simplicity of the soul that prays thus that we must say: If thine eye is simple, thy whole body will be full of light, that is, all the good works that you do in religion during the day as the result of such a prayer will be pleasing to Him to Whom you prayed and full of His divine, invisible, insensible light. It often happens that when we think we have light and graces we have them not, and when we think we have not got them we have them; that is why it is idle to take pains to look for lights in prayer, seeing that we have not got them, for the Holy Spirit's working in the soul is wholly interior and often unknown to the soul itself" (*Conference 30*).

Conclusion

We see that the mystical doctrine of Saint Jane de Chantal concerns souls that have perseveringly given themselves to complete renunciation, have borne well the purifying trials, and have received the grace of passive love. The holy foundress turns all her efforts to maintain these souls in the very simple, very humble practice of that pure love: since God has established love in them, they should be content with that, for it is worth more than anything they could give themselves. If they bestir themselves and mingle their eagerness with God's action, they can but raise obstacles to His plans. Their prayer, even if it is dry and cold, will be a prayer made by God Himself in them, and it will bear great fruit. It was of that prayer that Saint Jane de Chantal said:

"Prayer is a hidden manna that is not known or prized except by him who receives it, and by tasting it, the desire comes of enjoying it yet more. Whoever has this spirit of prayer dispatches more business in an hour than others in many, and, wholly freed, runs to his rest, which is converse with God; but God only gives Himself to the obedient" (*Works, Vol. Ill, p. 527*).

"I know nothing happier than the soul that is given to the interior life and prayer, and that knows how to converse with God and be united to Him. As our Blessed Father often said, it has discovered the alchemy that changes all its troubles into the gold of a most ardent charity; and as it tastes the divine sweetness, it knows by experience that there is nothing to equal the delight of living alone with God and having nothing to do with earthly things" (*Ibid., p. 463*).

Translator's Note

This little book was originally published in *La Vie Spirituelle*. Permission for translation has been kindly given by M. le Chanoine Auguste Saudreau, Principal Chaplain of the Mother House of the Good Shepherd and Honorary Canon of Angers, and by R. Pere Bernadot, O.P., Editor of the Review in question.

Other works by M. Saudreau have been translated into English.

These are:

- *The Degrees of the Spiritual Life, 2 volumes*.
- *The Mystical State, its nature, its phases*.
- *The Life of Union with God*.
- *The Ideal of the Fervent Soul*.

I have to thank the Very Reverend Dom John Chapman, O.S.B., who arranged for this translation, for very kindly reading the manuscript, and for much else.

A. E. H. Swinstead
November, 1928

About This EBook

The text of this ebook is taken from the book *Mystical Prayer According to Saint Jane de Chantal*, written and compiled by Auguste Sandreau, translated to English by A E H Swinstead. The edition used was published in February 1929 by Benziger Brothers.

It has the Nihil Obstat of Father Edward Mahony, S.T.D., Censor Deputatus, and the Imprimatur of Father Edmund Surmont, Vicar General, Archdiocese of Westminster, England, 14 January 1929.

The cover image is a detail of a stained glass window of Saint Jeanne de Chantal, date and artist unknown. The window is in the the church of Saint-Briac, Saint-Briac-sur-mer, Ille-et-Vilaine, France. It was photographed on 12 December 2018 by Emeltet, and the image swiped from Wikimedia Commons.

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